

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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Lent 2 - Deeper Commitment

February 28, 2021

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I want to try an experiment this morning, and have you all close your eyes and imagine with me. And I want you to imagine your life five years ago.

Where were you living?

What were you doing?

What meaningful relationships were in your life?

What was important to you then?

Now, think ahead, to present day and answer for yourself the same questions:

Where are you living?

What are you doing?

What meaningful relationships are in your life?

What is important to you now?

And now answer this question for me: Could you have imagined this to be your life ten years ago?

I imagine for most of us gathered today, the answer is 'no.' I suspect much has

If you told me five years ago that I would be living Edmonton, in Alberta of all places, that before that I would have just moved from small town Saskatchewan, and now I'm ministering to you lovely people, and for at least 1/2 of that time virtually over Zoom because of a global pandemic (something that I thought was just a board game), that in the last ten years I participated in the formation of a food bank, visited with prisoners, walking with many people through the celebrations of new life, and the end of lives, and building relationships with pastors not just in Canada but also in China, and that I would have had a chance to visit the Holy Land, and in all of this also finding love and marrying, I probably would have thought you nuts, I would have thought you crazy. And yet, this was the trajectory of my life. And it has been beyond anything that I could have possibly imagined.

Looking back, all that has taken place in the last five years has truly been beyond my own imagination. There's a line in the movie "We Bought a Zoo" where the main character, Benjamin Mee, reflects that "sometimes all you need is 20 seconds of insane courage, just literally 20 seconds of embarrassing bravery, and I promise you something great will come of it." And I can say, it's largely because of a few select moments of courage where I've said, sure, "let's give this a go and let's see what happens," that some of these amazing, unexpected things have occurred. And I wonder, could you share similar sentiments? When you look back on the last five years, or even longer, is the life you live, one that you could have imagined, or have you been surprised with how life has unfolded.

This week, we're being invited into the woods of deep commitment. This week we're exploring what it means to make deep commitments, and what it means to go into the depths of unknown places in making those commitments. And the accompanying image this week is the woods. And so, into the woods we go. I remember the first time I went canoeing in Northern Saskatchewan. It was both a freeing experience, and an uneasy experience. It was a time when I felt the lightest, where I felt my lungs full of fresh air for the first time in what seemed to be a long time, and it was also deeply disorienting. Going to new places is often that way. When we leave the familiar the unknown holds a combination of possibility, promise, and a little bit of fear, or at the very least uncertainty.

For me it was paddling out into the middle of a new and foreign body of water. Surrounded on all sides by, what appeared to me at least, to be the same tree. I wasn't sure which way we needed to go, and had a general sense of where I was coming from, but I had no idea where I was going. I remember asking the one who knew the way, my guide, one Dan Driediger, where we were aiming for. Very quickly and without hesitation Dan was able to point out the next step along the way, the place where we would have to portage, before our next leg of the journey. Admittedly to me it just looked like it arbitrarily pointed to some place in the distance, but as we got closer I could see that there was indeed a place cleared for a canoe to land.

Looking back now, after paddling out a couple times, I too can see the distinct places where we need to go. I can see familiar landmarks, the wilderness of this particular part of Northern Saskatchewan isn't as much a mystery to me any more. I'm no longer nervous about setting off on this particular route now, it's become familiar to me, rather it fills me with excitement and anticipation.

When I think of deep commitments I immediately think of my marriage. It's a very present example, so bear with me. And I think about how there is little certainty about the commitment that I've made to Christine, in fact, it's filled with many unknowns, many uncertainties. I remember shortly after the 'honeymoon' phase wore off, that there was a certain sense of 'oh boy' this is a big commitment that I've made. And then the relief that came with knowing and trusting that this was a lifelong project that I entered into WITH Christine, it wasn't solely up to me, that together we were working at, well, for lack of a better phrase, 'doing' life together.

Many of our commitments can be like this. There is often the moment when we realize how much bigger the commitment is than what we thought it might be. A few weeks ago you heard me reflect a bit on this with respect to my faith commitment. I think this is a bit of what we're seeing in our gospel reading this morning. Peter is having that 'oh boy' moment with Jesus, and the understanding of what it might mean to be a follower of the Jesus Way.

Peter thought he knew what he was getting himself into. He thought he knew what it meant to follow the Messiah, and he thought he knew how this was all going to go. So in the verses leading up to today's scripture when Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?" and Peter jumps in with both feet and declares that Jesus is the Messiah, except...except...what Peter thought, and what Jesus taught weren't necessarily on the same page. Peter was expecting a revolutionary, and Jesus...well, Jesus wasn't that. Jesus begins to teach what it means for him to be the Messiah...and Peter doesn't like it, it doesn't fit in with what he figures the Messiah to be, it's not what he was familiar with...and he pushes back.

It's easy to remain where we are, with what we know. To lean onto expectations. Familiar hymns, familiar prayers, familiar scripture stories, familiar authors or speakers. In some ways with all this familiarity faith becomes an exercise in nostalgia rather than something we are living into. So often with faith, we can find ourselves on the side of the road, safely looking at or into the forest, thinking, it looks nice in there, but I'm quite comfortable here. And at the same time, I often hear Jesus calling from within the forest, asking us to come to him. But answering that call isn't always easy.

Jesus makes this clear to Peter in the 2nd half of the scripture reading, following Jesus' rebuking of Peter. Jesus articulates the cost of being a follower. Yes, to be a follower of Jesus, requires a both feet in commitment, and...it requires courage. Courage to make the commitment, not knowing where Jesus may lead you. Courage to let go, and entrust the

outcome to God. Courage to enter into the forest of deep commitment. Courage to loose yourself with Jesus...only to find yourself as a beloved child of God.

Christ's invitation to enter into the forest is ever there, it's the eternal call to 'follow me.' And it's so easy to stay by the roadside and stay at the forest edge. However, in doing so, we miss out on the unimaginable. We miss out on possibility, opportunity, beauty, and truth. Sometimes all we need is 20 seconds of courage. For many of us, we've made a commitment, what would it look like, to step deeper into that commitment? What would it look like to explore the woods of that commitment a bit more? Where is Jesus calling to you to go?

My commitment to Jesus has taken me to places I never imagined I'd go, it's brought me into relationship with people I never imagined I'd get to know..or love, it's challenged me, and pushed me, and forced me to grow, sometimes in ways I'd rather not...and I wouldn't have it any other way. How about you? Can you say the same?

The woods can appear to be a place full of mystery, deep commitments are filled with uncertainty. And in both there is beauty, there is wonder, there is opportunity and possibility. And in both God dwells, ready and waiting for us.

Amen